HOORAY FOR THE PUMPKIN PIE!
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Psalm 65
Matthew 6:9–13
Habakkuk 3:17–19

"The meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy."
Psalm 65:13 (NRSV)

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers
there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness. . . .
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still
and learning to be astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture,
and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing,
since all ingredients are here,
which is gratitude

Mary Oliver
"Messenger"

Once again, O God, the earth has produced our food,
the harvest is in, and with people in every age,
back to the beginning of time, our hearts are full of gratitude.
We take it all for granted. But this morning we are aware
of the goodness and beauty of the world and of your love
and grace given to us and to the whole creation
in Jesus Christ our Lord. And so we say thank you.
Amen.

I'm not very good at coming up with clever sermon titles. So when I find one, I jump all over it. "Hooray for the Pumpkin Pie!" I discovered in a

whimsical editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* by Eric Felten on November 13 about how Thanksgiving is more and more crowded out of the calendar by Halloween and Christmas. Felten invokes the nineteenth-century song and poem, "Over the River and through the Woods."

> Over the river and through the woods
> To Grandmother's house we go.
> The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh
> Through white and drifted snow
>
> Over the river and through the woods,
> O how the wind does blow.
> It stings the toes and bites the nose
> As over the ground we go.

And on and on it goes to the end:

> Hooray for the fun
> Is the pudding done?
> Hooray for the pumpkin pie!

That's a pretty good title for a sermon on the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

There are two important and serious theological ideas in that line:

> That food—bread, milk, corn, butternut squash, pumpkin pie—the produce of the earth, the providential fertility of nature, is worth singing about and celebrating, that the food we eat is a gift from God and bears within it the grace of God. "O taste and see that the Lord is good," the psalmist wrote, and I think he didn't mean only a tiny piece of communion bread and a thimbleful of grape juice, but a robust, delicious meal.
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> And that it is a good idea for human beings to respond to this miracle—nature's generous provision, the everyday miracle that the world can be counted on to sustain us, to produce an abundance of food, good things to eat. "Praise," Walter Brueggemann says, in a scholarly discussion of the psalms, is both "a duty and a delight."

So "hooray for the pumpkin pie!"

Mr. Felten's editorial begins by observing the obvious: that in the early to middle of autumn (he wrote his column in early November), Christmas is already in the air. Starbucks retired the white cups and replaced them with irresistible "cranberry-colored, snowflake-flecked seasonal substitutes, weeks ago. Wal-Mart ads for weeks have featured Andy Williams crooning

‘It’s the most wonderful time of the year.’ Who knew?” Felten asks, “that the weeks between Halloween and Thanksgiving were ‘the hap-happiest season of all?’” Halloween—a much more muscular and marketable holiday than Thanksgiving, Felten says—is the only thing preventing “Christmas Creep” from extending all the way back to Labor Day.

Felten has a little fun asking what happened to Thanksgiving and says the answer is in Lydia Maria Child’s “Over the River and through the Woods.” First, it’s Grandmother. Who wants to go to Grandmother’s house and spend time with old people? And “over the River and through the Woods”: the modern equivalent is stripping at the airport for the Transportation Safety Administration pat down or sitting in your car in gridlock on the Interstate—all for a chance to make small talk with your in-laws.

“Christmas Creep” is all around us. We could fight back, of course: hunker down here for Advent and don’t start celebrating Christmas until it comes—or at least is close. We put up a little struggle. But it’s a little like trying to beat the Yankees in the World Series.

Last night, the night of the Michigan Avenue Lighting Festival, when all the twinkling white lights come on, with the Disney Holiday Parade with floats and Mickey and Minnie and Donald Duck and Daisy (celebrating their seventy-fifth birthdays and looking pretty good) and marching bands and loud music and, at the end, Santa himself—last night members of our choir and a few others (a nice little crowd, actually) stood on the front steps of the church and sang Christmas carols, just a tiny reminder, even though the event itself is a full five weeks away. I wouldn’t miss it. It’s great fun in a way, to stand there singing “Silent Night, Holy Night” as a huge, monstrous fifty-foot inflated snowman floats down Michigan Avenue while “Frosty the Snowman” blasts through the night air. It’s awesome: it’s so big it makes little children cry and hold onto their parents. We do compromise and join in the fun a bit by putting out the greens and, of course, bringing out our wonderful electric sheep, who gently and silently graze right on Michigan Avenue.

Eric Felten wonders if the real problem might be that we have lost our capacity for gratitude. Throughout most of human history, the success of the harvest in the fall was all that stood between the community and a long, cold winter of hunger and perhaps starvation. All spring and summer you watched it happen and began to worry: nobody worries like farmers—too little rain, too much rain, too cloudy, too hot, too dry, windstorms and hail, weeds and pests, insects and fungus. You watched. You watched it every day and worried and fretted and prayed to God. And when harvest time came and the barns and silos were full, you knew you were safe for another year, and it was a time for rejoicing and celebrating and giving thanks.

That is all gone, of course—that immediate connection between the grain growing in the field and our continued survival, for us at least, if not for much of the rest of the world. We, most of us, never see it. Our food comes from a supermarket shelf, wrapped in plastic, grown who knows how far away, shipped maybe thousands of miles. We complain when we can't find strawberries in February. We complain that there is simply too much of it, that we're overweight—"Is the pudding done? Hooray for the pumpkin pie?"—only if it's sugar free (see Felten).

If there is truth to the suggestion that we have lost our capacity for gratitude, perhaps it has to do with our literal and figurative distance from the natural world, our alienation from the earth and nature.

Francis Collins, former head of the Human Genome Project and currently Director of the National Institutes of Health, is a devout Christian as well as a distinguished scientist. In an interview, Collins said that intellectually curious believers will want to go deeper into the theology of their religion, but "that deeper searching has to involve more than searching through the Bible. We must also search through that other book God has given us—the book of nature."

For Collins and for a growing number of scientists, nature is a textbook in which to find fascinating and provocative information and discoveries and unexpected, unpredictable mysteries, with clear theological implications.

In her recent book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor says that, like many of us, she learned in church to view the world with suspicion. The world, she learned, was a fallen, sinful place, full of temptation and corruption. She learned that to be a good Christian was to reject the world, withdraw from the world, resist the world's seductive allure. But then she began to read the Bible and think about the Bible and discovered that in the Bible the world is also God's home, God's beloved creation, God's very good creation. In the Bible, she says, people encounter God not so much in church, "but under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, on mountains and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, and burning bushes. When people want to know more about God, the Son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay."

"Whoever wrote this stuff," she says, "believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture" (pp. 12–13).

Knowing that—acknowledging the world, the earth, nature, as God's good creation—and gratitude for what is, for the miracle of life itself, for the amazing productivity of the earth, is at the very heart of our religion.

“Praise is due to you, O God,” the psalmist wrote.

> You visit the earth and water it. . . .
> You crown the year with bounty.

Abundance . . .

> Pastures overflow,
> meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
> valleys deck themselves with grain.

There is so much abundance, so much grace in nature, that the hills and meadows and valleys shout and sing for joy (Psalm 65).

“Now Thank We All Our God, with Hearts and Hands and Voices”: the late Robert McAfee Brown, distinguished theologian, said that Thanksgiving hymn is the quintessential Christian hymn, appropriate for every occasion: for weddings and baptisms and funerals, before and after meals. “It is the hymn I find myself wanting to use,” he said, “after every sermon I preach. It is the hymn I fervently hope will be sung at my funeral.”

In that same address, Brown said,

> The distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is the word “grace.” That God is gracious to us, that God loves us no matter how unlovable we may be, that God visits us in the midst of distresses and identifies wholly with us is the heart and center of the Christian gospel and may be summed up in the word “grace.”
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> And if grace is the distinctive word to describe God’s attitude toward us, there is also a word that describes the nature of the response we are called upon to make. That word is “gratitude.” (*The Pseudonyms of God,* p. 13)

The popular American novelist John Cheever wrote elegant novels about upper-middle-class suburban life, including underlying anxiety and fear and superficiality and obsession with looking good and staying young and always too much alcohol. Cheever himself lived a hard and complicated life. But he was a churchgoer. People asked him about it: How can you write about the darkness of life and live the way you live and go to church every Sunday? Cheever said, “I go to church to make my thanksgivings. Period. The level of introspection I enjoy on my knees is something I enjoy nowhere else” (*Listening for God*, vol. 3, pp. 10–13).

The psalms urge us to look, to taste and see the beauty and goodness and grace all around us.

Artists and poets remind us to pay attention. Mary Oliver:

> My work is loving the world
> learning to be astonished
> rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,
> which is gratitude.

And Edna St. Vincent Millay, whom I think about every autumn, when the late afternoon light is so subtle and when the sky and the lake turn gray and even the trees in the little park I can see from my window hold onto their golden and orange and pale green leaves as long as possible:

> O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide grey skies,
> Thy mists that roll and rise!
> The woods this autumn day
> . . . I do fear
> Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.

And Wendell Berry traipsing around the woods in the back of his Kentucky farm and going home to write a marvelous Sabbath poem:

> I leave behind even
> my walking stick. My knife
> is in my pocket, but that
> I have forgot. I bring
> no car, no cell phone,
> no computer, no camera,
> no CD player, no fax, no
> TV, not even a book. I go
> into the woods. I sit on
> a log provided at no cost.
> It is the earth I've come to

(And then the poet begins to preach, to meddle a bit.)

> the earth itself, sadly
> abused by the stupidity
> only humans are capable of
> but, as ever, itself. Free.
> A bargain! Get it while it lasts!
> ("Look It Over," *Leavings, Poems*, p. 7)

But the thing about this gratitude to which we are called, this thanksgiving which the hills and fields and valleys sing, is that it comes even when there is no abundance or peace or well-being. It comes out of the depths of faith, even in adversity.

That's what the first Thanksgiving was about. Every Pilgrim family in the fall of 1621 had lost someone during the terrible first winter: a father, a mother, a child. Half of those who started the voyage in the *Mayflower* across the North Atlantic were dead by autumn 1621. Historians conclude there is no earthly reason any one of them should have survived that first winter.

But there was a small harvest now: corn, which natives showed them how to plant, squash, beans, peas and barley to brew beer. Governor William Bradford declared "a time to rejoice after a more special manner," sent four men "fowling" to bring duck and geese from the harbor. Natives, 100 strong, showed up, bringing five deer.

And so they ate and expressed gratitude to God in the middle of scarcity and insecurity, sickness, fear, and grief. Because, finally, gratitude does not depend on abundance or health or well-being. Gratitude, finally, is about God's grace and love and presence.

At the very end of the Old Testament book of the prophet Habakkuk, a book you can attend church a long time without ever hearing quoted—at the end, after the prophet complains to God and scolds the people and then thanks God for health and survival, are these amazing words:

> Though the fig tree does not blossom,
> and no fruit is on the vines;
> though the produce of the olive fails,
> and the fields yield no food . . .
> yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
> I will exult in the God of my salvation.

I learned it early: I was preparing the first Thanksgiving sermon I would preach as a newly ordained minister, thinking about God's goodness and providence, about abundance and plenty and gratitude for it all, including my little family, when, Friday morning, November 22, 1963, forty-six years ago today, the bottom dropped out. The President, John F. Kennedy, was assassinated. Nothing like it had ever happened, certainly not in my lifetime. People were afraid of what was happening to the nation, of what might happen next. I didn't know what to do. I was brand new at this business. My tiny church was, by far, the smallest in town. The only thing I could think to do was have a kind of combined memorial service and Thanksgiving. So that is what we did the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, four

days after the president was shot. The high school heard about it and allowed students to leave classes to attend. The tiny church was filled—the first time it ever happened; people stood in the aisles and back and outside on the porch and steps.

Preachers that year had to find a way to say thanks in the midst of loss and grief and fear. Somehow we did—ministers and people, devout believers and doubters and skeptics. We went to church that Thanksgiving to say thanks for something deeper and more profound and more real than an abundance of food or even health and security: the grace of God, the love of God, the promise of God to be with us forever.

So yes, “We gather together, to ask the Lord’s blessing. Sing praises to his name: he forgets not his own.”

Amen.